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ABSTRACT

Based on the view that adults are more effective in teaching positive behavior and in responding to children if they have some knowledge about child development, this pamphlet outlines children's typical abilities and behaviors at various ages from birth to 8 years. The pamphlet is designed to help parents protect their children as they grow up so they are not likely to be violent or to be victims of violence. Following introductory remarks on the meaning of child development, the pamphlet describes the importance of adults understanding child development and outlines basic principles about understanding child development and violence prevention. The pamphlet continues with outlines of children's cognitive and social/emotional development for the following age groups: (1) birth to 18 months; (2) 18 to 36 months; (3) 3 to 5 years; and (4) 6 to 8 years. Concluding the pamphlet is a list of important things for families to remember about expectations for children of different ages. (Contains 10 references.) (KB)

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For more information visit the ACT web site at
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Understanding Child Development as a Violence Prevention Tool

INTRODUCTION

Adults can do many things to help protect their young children from violence—that is, help children grow up so they are not likely to be violent, or to be victims of violence. Adults are more effective in teaching positive behaviors and in responding to children if they know how children of different ages might think and act. For instance, if a parent understands that a 2-year old child has a very short attention span, they would not expect him or her to stay seated quietly at a long church service. To be successful in teaching children positive nonviolent behaviors, adults need to take action based on what children are capable of understanding and doing at different ages and stages of development.

This document outlines important information, based on decades of research, about children's typical abilities and behaviors at various ages until age 8.

What does "child development" mean?

Child development is the unfolding sequence of physical, cognitive, social, and emotional changes that children undergo as they grow. The changes take place over time and they are influenced by a child's unique biological makeup combined with the cultural, social, and physical factors in his or her particular culture, family, and community environment.

It is easy to see the dramatic changes that occur from birth to early childhood. Children grow *physically* at the same time that they are learning how to react to the world and the people in it. This includes *cognitive development*—the youngster's ability to be aware of, think about, understand, remember, and use knowledge about the world and *social development*—the child's ability to interact with others; *emotional development*—how the child reacts to joy, fear, love, discomfort, anger, and other feelings.

When adults understand child development, it is helpful because:

- Adults are more likely to do the positive things that will support children's development.
- Adults are less likely to become frustrated or anxious about children's behavior because they will only ask children to do things they are capable of doing. Expecting behavior that is beyond a child's capacity leads to frustration and anger for all.
- It helps prevent physical or emotional abuse that might occur when adults become angry or frustrated with a child's challenging behavior.
- Adults will know more age-appropriate responses when young children misbehave.

Some basic principles about understanding child development and violence prevention

- Although each child is unique, with an individual pattern and timing of growth, there are predictable milestones along the way.
- The early years are important because that is the time when the brain matures rapidly, laying the foundation for lifelong learning and thinking. A young child's brain is a work in progress, and experience plays a vital role in shaping the way it functions.
- The early years are a time when children develop a sense of being an individual, separate from their parents, and they develop the ability to feel, think, trust, and relate to others.
- Young children learn by example in the context of important relationships, and the adults in their lives are the most influential teachers.
- Youngsters who have their basic needs met are more likely to develop resilience and be protected from later involvement with violence.

  The young children's basic needs are:

  —Develop a strong warm, intimate emotional relationship with the primary caregivers.

  —Feel safe, loved, and secure – physically and emotionally.

  —Develop a sense of trust, believing that their physical needs will be satisfied with responsive, consistent, reliable, and loving care.

—Receive positive attention from adults through play and everyday activities that build mutual respect and a sense of being connected with them.

—Have family members display, by example, how to constructively solve problems, deal with disagreements, and handle anger and stress.

—Develop the confidence to deal with things that happen to them by learning to solve simple problems.

—Learn to appreciate similarities and differences among people.

—Be protected from exposure to violence. Young children are deeply affected by the violence they see in real life or on television.

(Levin, Diane. (1998). *Remote Control Childhood*, p.28)

Remember!!!

Violent behavior is *learned*, and often it is learned early in life. The experiences that children have at early ages have a longstanding impact in their future lives!

WHAT ADULTS CAN EXPECT FROM YOUNG CHILDREN

This is a summary of what young children, with family support and a positive environment, are capable of understanding and doing at various ages. Bear in mind, however, that not all children will show these capacities at the same time. Also, children develop differently in different communities and cultures and because of disabilities or medical conditions. This document reports averages, and each child will develop a specific ability at his or her own pace.

This summary will address the cognitive and social/emotional aspects of child development, as they are relevant to violence prevention. *Cognitive development* includes thinking, reasoning, problem solving, memory, and language development. *Social/emotional development* includes understanding and expressing feelings, and responding to and interacting with others.

From Birth To 18 Months

Changes in the first year and a half of life are both dramatic and significant. Extensive biological and physical changes plus brain maturation and growth, with new cognitive abilities, allow children to gain mobility and coordination, experience and use memory, and develop emotional and social relationships. It is a period of great dependence on caregivers, since babies are increasingly being exposed to new situations with little experience, and only rudimentary communication skills to deal with the challenges.

Cognitive Development

Important characteristics of this age group:

- An infant's brain grows rapidly in size and complexity. Around 7 to 9 months, development in the prefrontal area of the cortex (area of the brain where high-level cognitive functions take place) makes it possible for children to start controlling their behaviors like stop from grabbing the first thing they see.
- The ability to remember increases rapidly during this age period. In the beginning, babies only attend to people and objects they can see or hear in the moment. Between 6 and 8 months, however, babies can recall objects and people that are not present. By age 1, children are capable of remembering past events for long periods of time.
- Babies are able to categorize people and objects in simple ways.

- Young infants can imitate live models as well as what they see on TV, even without full understanding of their actions; they learn by watching and imitating others.
- Children learn to understand language by hearing it, and they understand it much earlier than they learn to speak.
- While babies do not talk, they produce increasingly sophisticated noises to communicate and get their needs met. They can recognize their own names as early as 4 months. By 6 months, they begin to show understanding of words for highly familiar objects. By age 1, they can comprehend about a dozen common phrases. By 18 months they begin to use *me, I, you.*
- As babies begin to move around on their own, they begin to explore the environment and manipulate objects.
- Children are naturally curious and learn by exploring and manipulating things in their environment. They need social interaction and play to learn language, develop memory, and increase their attention span.

Social/Emotional Development

Important characteristics of this age group:

- The form of communication with adults changes. By 3 months, it is based on direct face-to-face interactions. When they start to move around and are able to recall objects and people, they look to adults for directions and indications about objects.
- Infants exhibit distress by crying and flailing their arms and legs. These behaviors generally signal discomfort—they may be tired, hungry, sick, hot, cold, or frightened by loud noise. Whatever the cause, the behavioral result is the same. Infants do not misbehave deliberately to annoy adults. In the earliest months, infants do not understand the cause and effect of their actions. Therefore, adults should not punish infants, but try to determine what needs to be changed to make them comfortable. Comforting an infant does not spoil the child. Instead, it helps build the basis for positive self-esteem when the baby learns that he or she can trust the caregiver to relieve the discomfort. This trust grows into a feeling of security and confidence. Babies who are comforted are easier to get along with later.
- Babies readily show interest, pleasure, excitement, contentment, joy and affection. They watch interesting faces and objects, and they show their emotions by cooing, babbling, and smiling in response to gentle voices, familiar faces, caressing, comforting, or feeding.

- Babies also show displeasure, distress, sadness, anger, anxiety, or fear. These emotions show up as fussing, crying and flailing arms and legs to show pain or distress brought on by hunger, thirst, fatigue, new situations, or new people.
- When babies become more mobile, around 6 to 9 months, they form strong attachments to specific caregivers, usually their mothers. Their emotional expressions change: they show distress when they are separated from their familiar caregiver, they become angry when frustrated, are afraid of strangers, and wary of unexpected situations.
- By about 10 months, babies gradually learn to recognize and interpret the emotional expressions of others and react to them: they relax when the caregiver looks pleased, and they show distress when the caregiver is upset.
- By the end of the first year, babies can differentiate people and can be affectionate to those whom they know.

From 18 To 36 Months

During this period, changes in the brain coupled with rapid physical development, plus the expansion in the kinds of experiences children have, result in changes in the way children interact with their world and the people in it. Their interactions and reasoning become increasingly more sophisticated, so that by about age 3, they typically can communicate using language, imitate actions and behaviors of others, play with other children, and engage in pretend play.

Cognitive Development

Children's major characteristics include:

- The brain continues the rapid production of new nerve cell connections (synapses).
- More complex thinking abilities make it possible for toddlers to mentally represent the world to themselves—not just perceive their present experience.
- Since they are able to have mental images of people and objects that are not present, children can develop fantasy and engage in pretend or fantasy play, where they use particular objects to represent others. For example, toddlers can play a game pretending that a stuffed toy is a real dog, or that a big box is their home.
- In the beginning of this period, children are more likely to play by themselves, but around 30 months, they can have an object perform a social role. For example, a youngster may use a doll to represent a mother or a child.

- Children initially learn by imitating adults and other children in their presence. As they develop the ability to remember, gradually they can imitate actions and events that occurred in the past.
- Youngsters get increasingly better at solving simple problems using mental schemes, not just by trial-and-error attempts.
- Toddlers understand that pictures represent objects and people—that they are not the objects and people themselves.
- The ability to represent things mentally and search for hidden objects is also associated with developing vocabulary. Children start to speak when they start to have mental representations of hidden objects. Around 16 months, babies understand 150-200 words. By age 2, they can follow verbal instructions, and by age 3, they master about 1,000 words. They always understand more words than they can use in speech.
- Over this age range, children have a vague notion of time, but still struggle with the meanings of *today*, *tomorrow*, and *yesterday*.
- This is a time of exploration, especially as children become more skilled at basic mobility—walking, running, and climbing. Children have high energy levels. Their attention span is short, and they are easily distracted. They can listen to stories for short periods of time.

Social/emotional development

Children's major characteristics include:

- During this period, children increasingly show a strong sense of self as a separate individual: they say NO to adults.
- By 18 months, they think they are the center of the world (egocentric) and that their needs should be met immediately.
- They begin to engage in pretend play by using objects to symbolize others.
- Children are interested in one another very early in their lives. The kind and complexity of the relationships they establish with each other vary as they grow older. For toddlers, play with unfamiliar children is hard, they prefer to play with friends.
- Children who have strong, secure bonds with their caregivers are more likely to be socially competent, popular, and less angry and aggressive with other children.

- Until around 18 months, they enjoy playing alone, but by age 2, they will share play space and enjoy the company of other children, but require close supervision and adult support.
- Toddlers learn social skills through play, by watching and imitating other children and adults, and making choices—with the security of a caring adult nearby.
- Young children move from expressing frustration by using tantrums, to verbalizing their feelings more often and/or expressing them through pretend play.
- They have a strong notion of territory: This is mine! Between ages 1 and 2 years, children are concerned with ownership rights and possession. There is an increase in aggression directed toward obtaining something (I want your ball!). Physical and verbal forms of aggression occur at equal frequency.
- Between 18 and 24 months, children begin to experience new emotions: shame, pride, guilt, and envy. They emerge because children can now think about and evaluate themselves in terms of some social rules or desired goals.
- By age 2, children are able to measure their behavior against the expectations of others. There is a growing sensitivity to and acceptance of adult standards.
- By the middle of the 2nd year, children begin to control and regulate their emotions. This happens because they now can understand behavioral standards and use them to evaluate their actions. Children who are able to control and modulate the expression of their emotions are more likely to get along well with others.
- Young children need caregivers to help them manage their emotions. When the emotional climate in the home is dysfunctional or abusive, children have no source for learning to manage their emotions. Consequently, they can experience significant emotional and psychological problems such as maladaptive emotions, difficulty in understanding emotion in others, and social incompetence.
- By age 2, children are less likely to be distressed when separated from familiar caregivers.
- Children strive to show their independence, and can be stubborn and contrary, showing rapid mood changes.
- Toddlers thrive in a balanced, secure, predictable routine with clear and reasonable limits.

Ages 3 Through 5

Children in this age group are no longer babies and toddlers. Important developmental changes continue to occur although they go more slowly than in the first 3 years. This period is the beginning of a long period marked by gradual changes that continue throughout adolescence and adulthood. Increasingly in our society, this is the age when children start nursery school, kindergarten, or other out-of-home care, thus expanding even more their contact with the world outside their homes. During this period, their brain grows to 75 to 90% of its adult size, their coordination improves, and their sense of sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste are fully developed.

Cognitive development

The major characteristics of this age period are:

- During this period, the most rapid growth in the frontal lobe area of the brain occurs. This area of the brain is responsible for planning and organization of new actions and behaviors, motor control, regulation of emotions, and maintaining attention to tasks.
- Children have trouble thinking about two aspects of the same problem. It is hard for them to focus their attention on more than one salient aspect of whatever they are thinking about.
- Children's thinking continues to be influenced by their egocentrism. It is still hard for them to see things from someone else's perspective. It is still difficult for them to realize that other people can have different thoughts from their own.
- At younger ages, children seem to transfer thinking about things from the particular to the general: "My grandma bakes cookies, your grandma bakes cookies too." Therefore, they are likely to confuse cause and consequence (cookies come from anyone who is a grandma).
- As children grow toward the end of this period, they begin to see the relationship of cause and effect (if I do this, then that will happen) and can think ahead to anticipate the consequences of their actions.
- Children start to make distinctions between reality and appearance, between what things seem to be and what they are. A 3-year-old will be more focused on appearance (a stuffed dog is a dog), whereas, a 5-year-old will make the distinction between reality and appearance (a stuffed dog is not a real dog). Their thinking is still based on the observable aspects of objects and people and on firsthand concrete experience.

- During this period, children experience great increase in their ability to have mental representation of objects, actions, and events; therefore, they can plan their actions in advance and use make-believe/pretend play in a more elaborate way. Children can think about things and people without seeing them, using their imaginations as mental representations.
- Although children's attention span improves during this period, they still cannot remain attentive for extended periods of time. They quickly become bored and tired of a single activity, such as waiting for something, listening to someone, or doing one thing for more than a few minutes. For instance, a 4-year-old can play with something or another child for about 20 to 30 minutes.
- Knowledge and skills are acquired by "doing"—having direct experiences like exploring, creating and trying new things in social interactions with others through play.
- Learning also occurs by imitating adult behavior.
- There is a great acceleration in language development: children of this age period learn an average of 50 new words per month and understand many more words than they can speak. At age 3, they employ more than 1,200 words, and by age 5, they employ 5,000 to 6,000 words. During this period, they go from speaking in 2 or 3 word sentences to more complex ones.
- Children develop the ability to think aloud or talk to themselves in an attempt to control their own behavior.
- At this age, children ask many questions to satisfy their curiosity or get adult attention
- Young children at this age understand and remember simple relationships, concepts, skills and routines.
- Children, at this age, understand spatial concepts like up, down, over, under, around and through; time concepts (today, yesterday, and tomorrow); and the ability to sort things by category (food, animals, flowers).

Social/emotional development

Characteristics of this age group include:

- It is the time when peers are very important to children: they are their agents of socialization and playing cooperatively with other children, sharing things and taking turns when they want to, is the preferred scenario.

- Children have diminished sense of "self as the center of the world" and their improved ability to think helps them to have a more stable perception of themselves. They also develop the capacity to make judgements about themselves and their worth. Families are crucial in helping children to have a positive sense of self.
- Children can interpret other people's emotions correctly. There is an increase in the ability to read the emotions of others and to control their own. But, they are more sympathetic to those they are familiar with, particularly when they are not the cause of the distress.
- Children continue to use different strategies to control their own emotions: they close their eyes and ears; they remove themselves from the situation; and they can resist the temptation to respond to whatever is disturbing them.
- Children start to display emotions more appropriately since they are more able to assess negative emotions.
- Children's physical disputes over possessions of objects or getting space decrease while the amount of verbal aggression (threats, teasing) toward others who anger them increases and bullying appears as a way to establish dominance.
- Boys tend to use object-oriented aggression to cause physical pain, girls are more likely to use person-related aggression to cause psychological pain.
- By age 3, children usually need help to resolve conflicts with other children and still have difficulty in sharing things. They express intense feelings but can play more cooperatively than toddlers.
- By age 4, children seek to resolve conflicts want to please their friends, are able to share things, increase self-regulation of behaviors and emotions, but still need adults to help them express and control feelings appropriately.
- By age 5, children cooperate well with other children, enjoy others, and can be empathetic. They understand the power of rejecting others.
- Because of their increased capacity to think and fantasize, children can imagine terrible things and develop fears. Adults should help children to feel safe and make the distinction between fantasy and reality.
- Children learn social skills and ways to express emotions by watching other children and adults.

- Children can distinguish among moral rules, social conventions, and personal rules: they start to understand when to apply them in different situations.
- As children become more capable of planning and reasoning, they are also more capable of understanding and internalizing social rules and acting in accordance with them.
- By age 4, children can have a sense of their ethnic identity, and the way their social group is viewed by society can influence their perception about their own identity.
- There is an understanding that either praise or blame can result from something they do. They enjoy helping and will respond well to praise, care and concern from an adult.
- Children can understand the difference between doing something "on purpose" and an "accident". They tend to focus more on the resulting damage than on the intentions of the perpetrator.

Ages 6 Through 8

During these years, children's rate of physical growth is slower. The brain has almost reached its adult size, and there is a dramatic increase in the quantity of real-world knowledge as children expand their experiences outside their homes—in their schools and communities. In fact, during this period, children start to spend more hours outside their homes, in school, with peers, and in activities without adults present. Thus, children start to have increased freedom and autonomy to explore their world. Children's better physical and cognitive capacities make it possible for them to be more responsible for tasks at home and in the schools. Children at this age are very energetic, like to make things, take risks, and are interested in accomplishing a task.

Cognitive development

As the brain continues to grow and mature, its development continues to underlie changes in cognitive skills. During this period, different parts of the brain start to function more effectively as a coordinate system. These newly developed functions enable children to coordinate more effectively their thinking and their behaviors. But, the part of the brain that is responsible for good judgment and the control of impulses—the pre-frontal cortex—is still immature; consequently, children of this age-period although improving, don't have yet the capacity to fully control their impulses.

For average children of this age group:

- Increase in speed and capacity of memory processing helps children focus on two or more aspects of a problem at a time while thinking about it.
- Children learn to control attention and concentrate on what they are doing for longer periods of time, so they can obtain and use information more efficiently.
- Thinking becomes more organized, allowing them to think about alternatives and reverse their thinking to solve problems.
- They are able to develop simple plans before acting, to achieve goals, making them more reliable without adult supervision. For example, when children invite friends over to play they can plan in advance what activities they will do together.
- There is an increase in their ability to classify and categorize things and put them in order according to multiple criteria, such as color, shape and size.
- They can think concretely (not abstractly) to focus on several parts of a simple problem at the same time.
- Children have a continually increasing vocabulary—by age 8, they can understand about 20,000 words. They begin to speak with more precision and to understand that a word may have different meanings.
- Their concept of time and distance are improving, but they are not yet able to correctly place events in time sequence.
- Children can distinguish between what is real and what is pretend.
- Practicing and paying attention can improve their chance of remembering new things.
- Youngsters can understand and apply rules, can make judgments, and they want the rules strictly followed.
- Around age 6, children begin to internalize strict moral rules of behavior—what's right or wrong. This enables them to be more independent from adult supervision.
- Although they are not yet capable of thinking and problem solving like an adult, children in this age group can increasingly understand the viewpoints of others, focus on several aspects of a problem at a time, classify objects, and control their attention.

Social/emotional development

Typical U.S. children of this age group increase the amount of time they spend outside the home with peers of their age and in situations both with and without adult supervision. Spending more than 40% of their time outside of homes, means less time with parents and other family members. This increased freedom affects children's social behavior in many ways.

The major characteristics of this period are:

- Children are intensely interested in peers, preferably those of the same sex. Friendships are very important because they help children develop the ability to communicate, understand others' points of view, and enable them to function as part of a group.
- They learn social rules and develop their personality by interacting with other children in their age group.
- The friendships are opportunities for give and take, negotiation of differences, shared experiences, and mutual trust.
- Children's play changes from fantasy play where imagination is the key element to rules-based games where the rules are the essence of the game and the objective is to win a competition regulated by rules.
- They are more capable of playing with a large number of children for longer periods of time, and of sticking to the rules as required in a game.
- Belonging and acceptance by peers becomes a very important concern for children; they no longer look to adults for gratification.
- Children are not only able to understand, realize, and predict that there are points of view different from their own, but they can also view their own thoughts and feelings from someone else's perspective.
- Children are very concerned with justice and fairness. They have strict understanding about what is "right" and "wrong". What is viewed by them as "fair" or "equal" is important and if the standard is violated they can be verbally or physically aggressive in an attempt to "get even."

- They develop and show social skills like empathy and compassion by observing the effect of their own and others' behaviors toward others.
- Relationships with parents change as children's competence and autonomy increase. Parents need to share their control over their children's lives with the children themselves. On the one hand, parents become more demanding; on the other, they need to change their parenting strategies to incorporate reasoning, reinforcement of children's understanding of right and wrong, teaching problem-solving and prosocial skills, and use of humor. Children have a self-esteem shift: They measure their own worth in a more objective way based on social acceptance and their own sense of competence.
- They need to develop a sense of mastery or competence by performing tasks without adult help.
- Parents who demonstrate acceptance of their children, define clear limits for activities and behaviors, and respect their children as individuals help them to develop high self-esteem.

IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER

Learning about child development helps families be realistic about what to expect of children at different ages:

1. Expect children to act like children; they are not little adults.
2. Give time and attention to children
3. Try to be consistent and fair in what to expect from children.
4. Show by actions what you expect of them.
5. In a few clear words, tell children how they should behave.
6. Pay attention to what you say and do with your children.
7. Conflicts with other people are part of life, but families should help children to resolve them in a non-violent way.
8. Families have two ways to promote prosocial behavior in young children: (1) *explicit modeling* so that children imitate adults who are behaving in the desired way, and (2) *teaching*, when adults explain the desired prosocial manners in a way that appeals to children's need to be proud of themselves, to feel like a grown-up, and to be concerned about others.
9. Children with high self-esteem can better develop ways to resist the risk factors for aggression and violence as well as other negative behaviors. Families can help children develop a positive sense of themselves by doing the following:
   a) Develop a close affectionate relationship with the children, showing that family members care about them and love them. Children will interpret their family interest as an indication of their personal importance and value.
   b) Define clear rules and limits for expected behaviors, giving children a sense of norms that are real.
   c) Show respect for the children's stage of development and unique personality and individuality.

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